

# **State Parks Path to Our Future Project**

## **Key Challenges and Strategies**

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***The California State Parks with its array of resources and services, provide many of the primary places where people come in touch with, and recreate within, California's diverse landscape and historical resources.***

### **Introduction**

The Director of the California Department of Parks and Recreation initiated the **State Parks: A Path to our Future** project out of a concern that the Department had lost some of its stature and was becoming less relevant to all Californians. He felt it was necessary to chart a new path to not only regain relevancy, but to also grow and change with California as it transitioned into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. To help develop this new pathway he developed a process that brought together a diversity of Californians and challenged them to give their best thinking to the subject. This meant involving both the traditional park activists, environmentalists, cultural and recreation stakeholders as well as numerous community leaders and advocate group representatives not traditionally involved with State Parks. These participants reflected both the State's diverse population as well as some of the best "out of the box" thinkers.

To assist these individuals in providing quality input to the process, initial research was conducted to assess the range of indicators of trends and conditions influencing the future of California parks in general and the State Park system in particular. These important factors included population and demographic changes, and specific transportation, development and environmental concerns. Findings from this initial review were formalized into the *Challenges & Choices* document which became the framework for the input process. The invited stakeholders and innovative thinkers came together at five one day Regional Workshops held in the urban areas of California, and a culminating two-day Vision Summit. The results of these input sessions were reviewed and organized into ten primary challenges combined with the applicable strategies to respond to each challenge. Subsequently, the Department's Resources Committee reviewed these materials in draft form and assisted in prioritizing both the challenges as well as their respective strategies.

Through this process has emerged a very clear image as to the most important challenges facing the Department along with the primary strategies to address those challenges. While it is believed that all ten of these challenge areas must be addressed, there is a need to emphasize those considered the top priority areas.

These recommendations are based on the results of the initial research, an extraordinary public dialogue at the Regional Workshops and the Vision Summit, feedback from Departmental staff and professional expertise.

A brief description of the challenges and their prioritization is described below followed by a more detailed discussion of the challenges and the specific suggested strategies for each.

### **First Tier Priority Challenges and Strategies**

Of the range of issues considered, the development of dependable sources of Department funding and a new emphasis on embracing inclusion and racial/cultural diversity are the highest priority challenges for the Department

Specifically, the "Dependable Funding" priority is the challenge to provide more dependable funding sources to carry the Department and Park System through both good and bad economic times. The challenge is to raise the importance and relevance of the Department and State Park

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System for the people of the State of California so that "State Parks are not on the cutting board during rough economic times" (Areias). It also involves establishing a set of dependable funding mechanisms/strategies that will support the Department through such adverse economic conditions. These funding mechanisms must be appropriate to the Department's Mission and avoid over-reliance on fee collection.

An equally important and related priority is a new emphasis on more fully serving all Californians - for parks to be more relevant and a part of people's lives regardless of race, creed, color, age, social, or economic status. As California leads the country as the most multicultural and multiracial state, both the Department and the range of opportunities in the State Park System must reflect the breadth of this rapidly growing diverse population. Attaining this goal will require a new emphasis on outreach, recreational programs and educational programs designed to provide new park experiences and to welcome, nurture and inform new users. It will also mean that the Department must move from the more passive focus of being a "service provider to the visitor" to a proactive focus. What will be required is an engagement and continuous investment in the communities that visitors come from in order to understand how to make parks relevant and to invite greater involvement in the parks.

These are the two key areas where the Department needs to initiate innovative strategies. Meeting these two challenges will be the defining signature of the Department over the next few years.

### **Second Tier Priority Challenge: The State Master Plan for Parks and Recreation**

The next priority is the creation of a statewide comprehensive master plan for parks and recreation, to be carried out by State Parks in cooperation with federal, state, regional and local park agencies. This master plan should encompass all levels of government and identify the priority needs as well as recommended solutions. It should provide multi-year guidance for investments in parks and recreation. This unifying blueprint for cooperation and emphasis on meeting overall needs will require leadership from the Department.

### **Third Tier Priority Challenges and Strategies**

The third priority area identified is a grouping of challenges, the responses to which will provide direction to the Department's land and resource acquisition, development and management. These subject areas address the need for:

- A shift from representational "islands" to "sustainable ecosystems" that will build on currently conserved lands by providing essential linkages and expansion where appropriate, in order to preserve California's globally important biodiversity and natural systems.
- Making the State Park System more accessible and nearer to the major population centers of the state.
- Providing expanded and new recreation opportunities to keep pace with California's growing population needs and changing lifestyles.
- Developing a strategic plan to continue to update the Department's historic and cultural collections and sites to represent more recent events that have shaped who we are and how we got here, as well as the physical traces and best examples of arts and cultural traditions of California's increasingly diverse and international population.

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### **Fourth Tier Priority Challenges and Strategies**

The fourth priority involves changing the role of the Department from “manager” to “facilitator” and the role of the citizens from “users” to “owners”. The Department needs to provide opportunities for in-depth experiences, connection and commitment to parks, cultural and historic heritage sites, artifact collections and outreach programs. Greater involvement, stewardship and volunteerism in the parks will keep the dream of preserving and caring for California’s unique natural and cultural heritage alive in the hearts and lives of its citizens.

### **Fifth Tier Priority Challenges and Strategies**

The two remaining Challenges and Strategies are the final priority tier and they address redefining both the internal structure of the Department as well as creating a new face for State Parks to the public. Although these two challenges are the last tier of priority, there is an awareness that a new Departmental image and a major change in the Department’s internal culture is needed to accomplish the higher tiered priorities.

- Change the Department’s Internal Culture: expanding the Department’s staff , broadening public awareness of the existing expertise in the Department and broadening personnel capabilities
- Creating a new Department image

### **Summary and Implications**

These recommendations are made based on the six month process of the **Path to the Future Project**. Now it is time for the Director and his executive staff to review these recommendations for priority Challenges and Strategies, to weigh against their own vision of the future path for the Department and Parks System.

When these key challenges and strategies are shaped and owned by the Director and his executive staff, they will provide the map for the more specific Departmental Strategic Plan, organization, budgeting and performance evaluation. They will also have implications for how to most effectively organize the Department, how to rebalance the staffing and budget and how to identify functions, facilities and roles that the Department needs but currently doesn’t have. Finally, the Director will be able to choose his own long term contribution to addressing the challenges for the Department in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; to create a path to the future.

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### **First Priority Challenges**

1. **Ensure more Dependable Funding:** There is a need to provide more dependable, stable funding sources that are appropriate to the Department's mission and avoid the over-reliance on fee collection. To meet this challenge the Department needs to initiate the following actions:
  - a. Streamline the outdated legislative and administrative requirements of the Department to make it more attractive & flexible for partnering with other agencies and more able to take advantage of opportunity acquisitions. As a first step, seek authority to grant funds to qualified nonprofit organizations to enable partnerships with the many nonprofit agencies.
  - b. Work with the Administration and Legislature to add some of the surplus funds this year to a public endowment fund for the Department, to be used during "downturn" economies for basic park operation and maintenance when annual revenues are low.
  - c. Work with the State Parks Foundations to explore the possibility for an endowment fund that could cover both capital and operational costs.

#### **Action Implications**

*These actions would impact the Department primarily in the area of the legal and legislative units. It would require considerable progress in other challenge areas to obtain the support of the Legislature and the Governor*

2. **Inclusion - "An Invitation to All Californians"**- There is a need to more fully serve all Californians – for State Parks to be more relevant and a part of people's lives regardless of race, creed, color, social or economic status. To meet this challenge the Department needs to initiate the following actions:
  - a. Conduct an active outreach/marketing program to diverse cultures/people.
  - b. Expand school field trips to the parks and provide "Welcome Back" coupons to the children's families.
  - c. Update published materials, videos, etc. to reflect the diversity of California.
  - d. Implement a neighborhood-to-park ambassador program. Go to the communities and partner with the organizations that already service the populations we wish to reach.
  - e. Increase staff diversity -- ensure that staff is reflective of the State's diversity. Train staff to serve multicultural populations.
  - f. Use appropriate parks and/or recreation areas as venues for special cultural & multicultural events and celebrations.
  - g. Focus on involving youth in a variety of programs in the parks across the spectrum of race & ethnicity to help make State Parks the place where it is safe and natural to cross

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cultural boundaries. Touch people's lives with a positive experience. Engage our youth in State Parks to build a base for personal experience.

- h. Shift from the police image to the welcome/interpreter image, while still providing public safety services.
- i. Expand services and presence in under-served (urban) programs and events. Consider programs which are not limited to State Park facilities or lands.
- j. Follow through with initial contacts and commitments & build credibility with nontraditional user groups.
- k. Hire staff that wants to serve communities.

#### **Action Implications**

*These actions would impact the Department in the areas of park management approaches, geographic equity, marketing, outreach, recreation programming, planning and budgeting, broader environmental programs, community relations, recruitment and training. Our success in achieving relevance and inclusiveness requires a willingness to make internal changes, change service delivery, remove social & economic barriers and capture opportunities.*

3. **Develop a Statewide Comprehensive Park & Recreation Master Plan:** This master plan should encompass all levels of government and should identify the priority needs as well as recommended solutions. To meet this challenge the Department needs to initiate the following actions:
  - a. Develop a new role for the State Parks Department as the overview agency for the Statewide Comprehensive Master Plan.
  - b. Develop and improve partnerships with local governments and other public, nonprofit and private agencies providing park and recreation resources.
  - c. Work with the California Park and Recreation Society, the League of California Cities, the County Supervisors Association of California and others to develop a coalition for legislation for a State Park and Recreation Master Plan.
  - d. Develop a technical assistance capacity for other park agencies. Facilitate roundtables, resource sharing and problem solving to address the major common issue areas & subjects.
  - e. Develop legislative and administrative support to reestablish a Departmental park system planning unit to work with local agencies in developing a Statewide Park and Recreation Master Plan.
  - f. Develop the capacity within the Department to do such a plan by accepting and building on the Challenge Grant from the Trust for Public Lands for a pilot program in the Southern California area.

#### **Action Implications**

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*In order to implement these actions the Department needs to reestablish a full-service planning division.*

### **Other Important Challenges listed in order of priority**

4(tie) **Increase Availability & Accessibility** – The State Park System needs to be more available and accessible to the major population centers of the State. Our urban populations need to become more fully exposed to, and connected with their State's natural resource areas, cultural and historical places and icons. To meet this challenge the Department needs to initiate the following actions:

- a. Assume a leading role in establishing urban area trails and river greenways connecting parks through and around the perimeter of the urban area.
- b. Ensure affordability of parks -- fee removal/ reductions, balance fees with services, special free access events, coupon return programs.
- c. Achieve greater geographic equity in the distribution of State Park Units by locating new units near or within urban centers.
- d. Create "introduction" or "Gateway" parks in and near urban centers to introduce non-users to the enjoyment and inspiration of the State's natural and cultural heritage values as well as orientation to the more distant or remote park resources.
- e. Improve the campground reservation system for facility use: make it more accessible and easier to use (*not necessarily only by on-line services - be cognizant of the digital divide*)
- f. Partner with transit providers to enable access from urban areas to improve accessibility for transit dependent people and to reduce automobile dependency
- g. Plan and develop services and facilities for the expanding urban markets in the Central Valley

### **Action Implications**

*These actions would impact the Department in the areas of acquisition and geographic equity, grants to other agencies & local services, community relations, legislation, revenue sources and reservations.*

### 4(tie) **Managing Natural Resources & Biodiversity: Shift from**

**Representational Islands to Sustainable Ecosystems**: There is a need to protect and ensure the perpetuation of biological diversity and self-sustaining natural systems that support the individual park units. There is also the need to expand the system of parks to include other less represented habitats in threat of destruction. To meet this challenge the Department needs to initiate the following actions:



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- a. Conduct appropriate research and improve the database for identifying requisites for habitat sustainability, better resource management and better recreational management.
- b. Expand current units to encompass self-sustaining habitat bioregional systems including whole watersheds where possible.
- c. Identify and preserve important un-represented and under-represented landscapes and habitat types within the Park system. Focus on areas near or within urban centers.
- d. Participate proactively in local and regional planning efforts.
- e. Partner with other agencies and non-profits in land acquisition, plans for restoration and other resource management efforts.
- f. Work with others to connect existing units to other preserved habitats through habitat linkages.
- g. Participate in a statewide strategic biodiversity or habitat protection plan that focuses on priorities for funding and using partnerships to pool resources and skills for acquiring, managing, interpreting and restoring sensitive habitats. Look beyond single agency boundaries.
- h. Where necessary, protect existing parks through involvement with local and regional land use decisions that affect the viability of values within the parks units; develop good working relationships with local governments adjacent to state parks but know and use the skills and technical resources for defensive planning when appropriate.
- i. Exploit the educator role of the Department through greater involvement with educational venues. Partner with colleges and universities to conduct appropriate research in State Parks. Involve lay people of all ages in restoration and environmental health monitoring programs.
- j. Use State Parks onsite and offsite interpretive programs to promote sustainable ecosystems and explain to urban populations why conservation is important. People become advocates when they go through a process of awareness, exposure, involvement, understanding and empowerment.
- k. Improve the science and environmental assessment methodology for identifying management approaches to control the impacts of different public uses in sensitive habitat areas. Continue to evaluate the effectiveness of resource management within the existing preserves, reserves and other environmentally sensitive areas to develop a guide for best management practices.
- l. Work with the Resources Secretary and other agencies to define State Parks role in habitat and resource protection in relationship to other Resource Agency departments and to the existing and new conservancies.

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- m. Interpret the relationship and connections between the urban and natural environment.  
Promote the view that urban/built ecosystems and natural ecosystems are one. Develop a systems approach to ecosystem management.

### **Action Implications**

*These actions would impact the Department in the areas of interagency coordination, research, planning, acquisition, resource management, community, stakeholder involvement environmental restoration, and interpretation.*

- 5. **Expand the Range of Recreation Opportunities:** There is a need to provide additional recreation opportunities to keep pace with California's growing population needs and changing lifestyles. To meet this challenge the Department needs to initiate the following actions:
  - a. Achieve greater geographic equity in the distribution of State Park units and park services by locating new units near urban centers; focus more parks, more facilities and more parks and interpretive programs south of the Tehachapis.
  - b. Expand park and facility options to include a wider variety of configurations for camping and day use to enhance participation of larger family and friendship groups.
  - c. Provide a fuller range of recreation options;
    - OHV parks,
    - RV campgrounds
    - cabins/lodges
    - trail hostels
    - walk-in wilderness camping
    - preserves and reserves limited to day use nature study and wilderness opportunities.
  - d. Increase the number of facilities for camping and other traditional user categories to accommodate growing demand.
  - e. Elevate the level of attention given by the Department to recreational activities and programs so that recreational use may be planned into the balance of natural and cultural resources.
  - f. Develop a greater system of trails, greenways and access corridors to make the trip between park units and other park lands a more extensive recreation experience.
  - g. Consider greater reliance on, and take advantage of opportunities made available through greater use of the private sector. Explore involving non-profits and concessionaires in environmental education in the parks and in park programs.
  - h. Clarify and strengthen the credibility and expertise of the Department by providing a variety of recreational facility and activity opportunities. Strengthen the capacity of the

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Department to work with communities and stakeholder groups to locate these facilities where people are confident that they will do no harm.

### **Action Implications**

*These actions will impact the Department in the areas of planning, acquisition, environmental design, recreational programming, environmental education and concessions.*

6. **Expand the Cultural/Historical Preservation Role:** There is a need to add new historic and cultural preservation related places and artifacts. These additions should include both the more recent events that have shaped who we are and how we got here, and also the physical traces of the broader diversity of peoples that make up our State. To meet this challenge the Department needs to initiate the following actions:
  - a. Improve upon, and complete, some of California's major theme areas such as Native American land use and resource management, and early Spanish and Mexican influences, mining and agricultural activities, water projects, the Arts, and unique industries.
  - b. Initiate an inventory of more contemporary places, events and icons that could contribute to the array of stories that help define California as a place.
  - c. Elevate the importance within the Department to California's diverse historical and cultural resources and to telling the story of the State's history, arts and cultures in the parks. Create park elements and park programs to tell these stories.
  - d. Increase utilization of appropriate park units for relevant historical events, living history days, theater, as well as recreation and nature study, etc.
  - e. Initiate an inventory of the historical remnants of the many different peoples of our State.
  - f. Build upon programs such as the "Park to Park" Index which quantifies historical remnants of our multicultural heritage. Expand the inventory of more contemporary places, events & icons, that could contribute to the array of stories that help define California as a place.
  - g. Partner with museums to bring cultural artifacts out of storage – Consider traveling cultural exhibits.

### **Action Implications**

*These actions will impact all areas of the Department.*

- 6(tie) **Promote Greater Public Involvement /Participation** There is a need to encourage personal in-depth experiences and commitment through greater involvement, stewardship, and volunteerism in the parks. To meet this challenge the Department needs to initiate the following actions:
  - a. Strengthen linkage with school community service requirements and park stewardship activities for young people.

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- b. Specifically train staff in community involvement/ facilitation techniques and in working with volunteers to share ownership of the parks.
- c. Form a youth advisory committee.
- d. Partner with the religious community to communicate the value and importance of park resources and for grassroots support to engage non-traditional users.
- e. Re-affirm the positive relationship between Park foundations and the park units.
- f. Strengthen partnering relationship with CCC and other youth recruitment organizations
- g. Promote community based programs for park stewardship
- h. Expand recruitment of all segments of the community -age groups, gender, ethnicity, etc” for Park docent programs. Recognize and promote the benefits of volunteering from the perspective of the volunteer: i.e. socialization, self-esteem, civic pride & environmental stewardship
- i. Reinvigorate the existing partnership with cooperative associations, defining their role and areas of assistance within State Parks.
- j. Promote volunteers in resource management and restoration – especially in urban parks.
- k. Partner with urban youth organizations such as scouts etc. to increase exposure to parks. Provide the needed facilities to accommodate these groups. Consider fee reductions as incentives.
- l. Establish a goal for all Californian students to visit a State Park.
- m. Partner with the Californian Association of Museums.
- n. Exploit the Internet as a marketing tool and as a venue for information dissemination.
- o. Expand interpretive staff to focus on schools and aligned school curricula.

### **Action Implications**

*These actions would impact the Department in the areas of planning, acquisition, resource management, environmental design, and interpretation.*

7. **Change the Department’s Internal Culture:** There is a need to expand the Department’s staff , broaden public awareness of the existing expertise in the Department, broaden personnel capabilities to address new issues and challenges and diversify its makeup. To meet this challenge the Department needs to initiate the following actions:
- a. Develop incentives to attract and keep staff in the Department, including adding new opportunities for promotion and salary increases. Determine the causative factors for both “burn-out” and departure. Conduct exit interviews with departing employees.
  - b. Increase the range of scientific, resource management and cultural interpretation skills to meet current and future challenges.
  - c. Attract young people to the job ladder. Diversify staff by considering candidates from other than traditional disciplines and by working with the CCC, K-12 and higher education programs to connect young people to the land and resources.

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- d. Seek professional help to facilitate organizational change.
- e. Make the case to increase personnel in order to manage all aspects of State Parks' duties and responsibilities; capital dollars without planning, operational and management staffing dollars will not be used as effectively.
- f. Turn the Department from "inward" looking to "outward" looking; use the expertise of State Parks staff and consultants/experts on planning issues that affect parks in arenas outside of the Department
- g. Increase the proactive planning capacity of the Department to include expanded or new components and skills:

**Action Implications:** *These actions would impact the Department in the areas of training, interagency coordination, outreach programs, and community relations.*

- 8. **Create a New Department Image:** There is a need to communicate, both internally and externally, the richness of values contained within the State Park System. There is also the need to communicate a clear and consistent image of the Department as it meets all of the challenges outlined above. Create an image that:
  - a. Conveys the primary welcoming to State Parks
  - b. Serves as the primary interpreter of the State's natural & cultural history and assets
  - c. Helps people identify with and appreciate the State's rich natural and cultural resources
  - d. Engages the public in stewardship as well as in the enjoyment of the resources
  - e. Demonstrates the Department's leadership role and responsibility in the providing of park and recreation resources in California through its administration of the local assistance and grant programs and its management of the State Park system.
  - f. Shifts from the police image to the welcome/interpreter image, while still providing public safety services. *(Inclusion)*
  - g. Develop a "sound bite" that will carry the new message – then keep it until the State is saturated with the message.

### **Action Implications**

*These actions will impact all areas of the Department.*